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African-American Museum (1993-1994): Correspondence 04

Robert McC. Adams

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Washington, D.C. 20560
U.S.A.

May 20, 1994

Honorable Wendell Ford
Chairman
Committee on Rules and Administration
United States Senate
Washington, D. C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to comment further on H.R.877, to authorize the establishment of the National African American Museum within the Smithsonian Institution, and to respectfully urge your committee to favorably report, and seek prompt Senate consideration, of the bill. As the end of the legislative year approaches, I recommend that legislative action be completed on this significant initiative before the conclusion of the 103rd Congress.

H.R.877, introduced by Congressman John Lewis of Georgia on February 4, 1993, is the companion measure to S.277, sponsored by Senator Simon of Illinois and currently pending before the Committee. Approved by the House Committee on Public Works and Transportation with an amendment stipulating that funds appropriated [for the Act] would be available only for costs related to the Museum's establishment and operations, H.R.877 was subsequently passed by the House on June 29, 1993.

Both H.R.877 and S.277 embody the provisions of S.523, which was favorably reported by the Committee and subsequently passed by the Senate during the 102nd Congress. Unfortunately, the House did not complete action on a companion bill prior to adjournment. S.523, however, as previously amended and passed, represented a significant compromise crafted by Smithsonian representatives and Congressional sponsors to house the proposed Museum within the Institution's Arts and Industries Building. Endorsed by the Smithsonian Board of Regents, the alternative plan would place the Museum within an existing structure and coincide with the already-planned interior upgrading and renovation of the building. Upon enactment of the current bill, H.R.877, the Institution's strategy will be to use approximately \$475,000 in these existing planning and design monies to develop a comprehensive plan to create the museum relying primarily on

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non-Federal funds. Therefore, the Smithsonian has no current plans to request Federal funds for this project. In pursuing the most feasible economical approach to the project, the Institution intends to mitigate the budgetary impact of establishing the Museum and to focus on the programming issues that form the basis for the Museum. Further, although it is our strong preference not to request additional Federal funds for this project, the Board of Regents has expressed its view that it does not wish to preclude the possibility of requesting Federal funds if it can be demonstrated that such funds would be necessary to provide significant leverage in maximizing private contributions.

By way of background, during several meetings beginning in 1989, the Smithsonian's Board of Regents, which included Senators Moynihan, Sasser, and Garn, considered the proposal to establish a museum of African American heritage on the Mall. In January 1990, the Regents were advised of the initiation of a study to explore the prospect of an African American presence on the Mall, to assess the needs in the field, as well as those of the community, and to make recommendations to the Board of Regents on this endeavor.

The study committee sought the viewpoints of many interested parties: twenty-two historians, educators, cultural administrators, business people, and others examined model institutions and communicated with a variety of museums, research centers, and archives about issues, collections, missions, and the evolution of missions over time.

At its meeting on May 16, 1991, the Board of Regents accepted the report of the committee and endorsed in principle its findings that (1) a free-standing African American museum should exist at the Smithsonian; (2) the museum should be housed on the Mall, in the Arts and Industries Building; and (3) the board structure should be modelled on that of the National Museum of the American Indian. The Regents also stated that, consistent with Smithsonian policies in establishing such museums, a necessary first step would be to identify core collections that would comprise its holdings and encouraged the Secretary to commission a study to that end as soon as possible.

Following a nation-wide canvass of collections potentially available to a National African American Museum conducted over the summer of 1991, the Regents received the subsequent report on September 16, 1991. Smithsonian staff identified more than 15,000 available objects and many potential donors, including four collectors, each possessing in excess of 1,000 objects. To date, 30,000 objects including four collections containing more than 5,000 objects have been identified. In addition, several of the potential donors and museums that had responded to the Smithsonian's survey indicated interest in contributing to this Institutional effort through long-term loans.

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Following this presentation, the Regents adopted a motion again endorsing the establishment of a National African American Museum within the Smithsonian and encouraging the Secretary to draft legislation to that effect, consistent with the Regents' previous discussions. At their meeting on February 3, 1992, the Regents endorsed the proposed amendment in the nature of a substitute to S.523, and asked their Congressional Members to support such legislation.

H.R.877 makes certain findings and establishes the National African American Museum within the Smithsonian Institution. The purpose of the Museum is to provide a center for scholarship and a place for exhibitions, collections of artifacts and documents, educational programs, and training of museum professionals in the area of African American life, art, history and culture. The Board of Regents is authorized to plan, design, and renovate the Arts and Industries Building in order to house the Museum.

Organized with a structure similar to the Board of the National Museum of the American Indian, the Board of Trustees of the Museum established in the bill would consist of 23 members, including the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, an assistant secretary designated by the Regents, and 21 other members who would represent a diversity by region and geographic origins. The bill outlines the duties of the Board of Trustees, including the responsibility for recommending annual budgets for the Museum and, under the policies established by the Board of Regents, sole authority for loans, acquisitions, and deaccessions. The Trustees also would establish policy governing collections utilization, programming, education, exhibitions, and research. Consistent with the general policy of the Board of Regents, they would have authority to provide for the restoration, preservation, and maintenance of the collections of the Museum; to solicit funds and determine appropriate uses of such funds; to approve expenditures from the endowment and earned income; and to consult with the Museum director on the operation of the Museum.

The Museum's Board of Trustees may establish cooperative programs with and support the efforts of other African American museums, historically black colleges and universities, historical societies, educational institutions, and cultural and other organizations to educate and promote understanding regarding African American life, art, history, and culture. These efforts may include cooperative programs and exhibitions, collections, management, and fellowships for professional museum training. The Board of Trustees is to adopt bylaws to carry out these functions and must report annually to the Board of Regents on acquisition, disposition, and display of African American objects and artifacts, as well as on other appropriate matters.

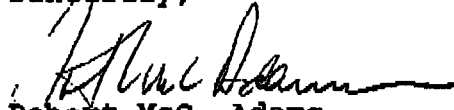
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The bill provides the Secretary of the Smithsonian authority to appoint a director of the Museum in consultation with the Board of Trustees.

H.R.877 defines certain terms used in the legislation; it authorizes appropriations of \$5 million for Fiscal Year 1994 and such sums as may be necessary for each of the succeeding fiscal years.

The Office of Management and Budget advises that there is no objection to the submission of this report from the standpoint of the Administration's program.

Sincerely,



Robert McC. Adams
Secretary